



# Fill (Don't Fall into) the GAP

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**S**urely you've heard about the gender wage gap. It seems that not a month goes by where the issue doesn't somehow make its way into the national news. So renowned is the subject that people both in and out of the labor market are likely to know the proverbial statistic: on average, women in America earn 76 cents for every dollar that a man earns.

Few involved in this discussion argue that the disparity doesn't exist. Rather, debate more often ensues from the question of why women earn less. And for you women out there who are graduating from school and are about to enter the workforce, or are entering college and trying to choose a major, this question may be foremost in your mind.

One of the most commonly offered explanations for the gender wage gap is that women tend to choose occupations that pay lower wages in general, whereas men are more likely to choose occupations that have higher average wages. According to the annual Utah occupational wage survey, workers (both men and women) in management occupations earned the highest average wage in 2005 (about \$76,600 annually).

Data from the 2000 Census (the most recent data available) shows that only 6.1 percent of working women in Utah (approximately 28,360 women) held a management occupation. In fact, only 8.2 percent of Utah's employed females worked in the four highest-paying occupational groups (management; legal; computer and mathematical; and architecture and engineering), which together have an average annual salary of just under \$67,000. Of the total number of Utahns working in those occupation groups, only a little over one-third of them are women, despite the fact that they comprised almost 45 percent of the total Utah labor force.

What type of occupation is a working woman most likely to hold in Utah? Not surprisingly, office and administrative support occupations reign supreme with 29.3 percent. Also not surprising is how the wages in that group stack up. The average wage for those occupations is just over \$26,500, which is well below the total occupational average of about \$34,400. So too are the annual wages for sales (\$29,900) and education (\$34,100), the second and third most popular occupational groups among working Utah women. Moreover, 78.1 percent of female workers in Utah were employed in occupations

that, on average, pay below the overall occupational average wage.

If women are more conscious of these statistics and choose their occupations accordingly, will they have a dollar in their pocket instead of 76 cents? The answer to that question is most likely no. Occupational choice is only one possible explanation for the wage gap. Other factors could also play a part, such as part-time work, longevity, and gender discrimination.

Perhaps the more important question to ask is "Why should we care?" The answer is that a growing number of

families rely on a woman's income (either as primary or secondary) to meet their needs. Besides the issue of fairness, low wages for women can have a profound effect on society when those wages render that mother/wife/caregiver unable to afford her family's basic necessities. As such, it is critical that we understand why it is that women earn less than men and what we can do to find parity between the sexes. ⓘ

For more information on Utah's Female Labor force, go to: <http://jobs.utah.gov/opencms/wi/pubs/hardatwork>

## Utah Employment and Average Wage by Occupation

